

Pim de Klerk

Peatland poetry from the past:  
The Calydonian boar in the Metamorphoses by Ovid  
(43 BCE – 17/18 CE)

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*“concava vallis erat, quo se demittere rivi  
adsuerant pluvialis aquae: tenet ima lacunae  
lenta salix ulvaeque leves iuncique palustres  
viminaque et longa parvae sub harundine cannae.  
hinc aper excitus medios violentus in hostes  
fertur ut excussis elisi nubibus ignes.  
sternitur incursu nemus, et propulsa fragorem silva dat”.*



Alaska pipeline winds its way through the peaty tundra. Photo: Hans Joosten.

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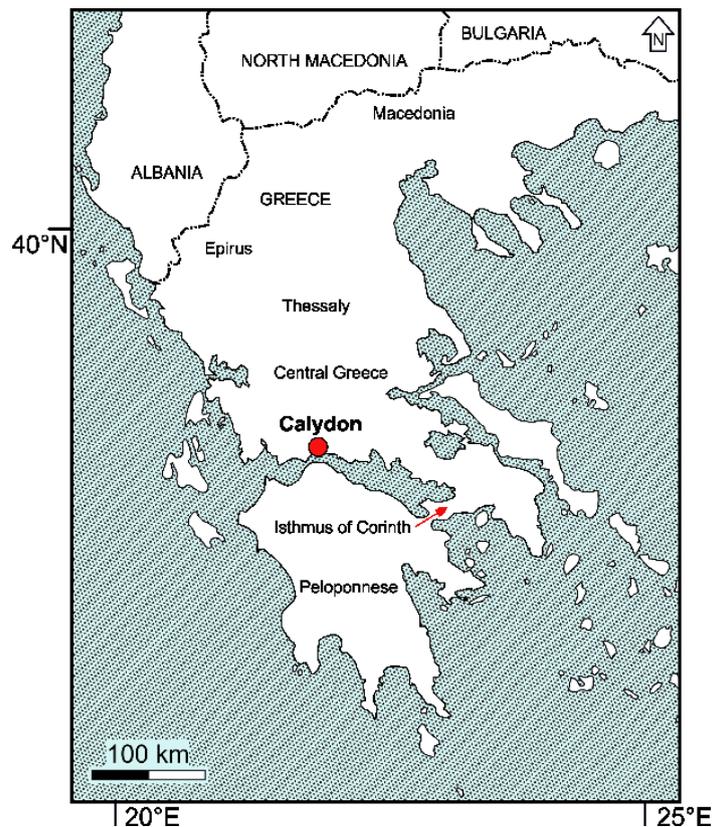
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## Peatland poetry from the past:

### The Calydonian boar in the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (43 BCE – 17/18 CE)

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The Greek and Roman mythology contains many exiting stories of gods and goddesses, demigods and heroes, wars, quests and horrific creatures. One of the most famous monsters was the Calydonian boar that Artemis (known as Diana in the ancient Roman pantheon) had sent as punishment for the people of Calydon, which had forgotten to sacrifice to her. The animal was gigantic, had huge tusks and spewed lightning that set the agricultural fields on fire. Some 40 of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology under the leadership of the Calydonian prince Meleager eventually hunted the boar down. The story is told briefly or referred to by Homer (*Iliad* IX:651-668), Hesiod (*Catalogue of women* fragment 98), pseudo-Apollodorus (*Library*, various places), Plutarch (*Parallel lives*, chapter on Theseus), Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, various places), Procopius (*On the wars* V:15), and various others. Strabo posed that the Calydonian boar was an offspring of the Crommyonian sow (*Geography* VIII:6,22), which had ravaged the area around the Isthmus of Corinth until it was killed by the Athenian hero Theseus. Pausanias told that the alleged original tusks of the Calydonian boar were taken to Rome by Emperor Augustus (*Description of Greece* VIII:46,1). In the time of Pausanias (second century CE) one of these tusks had been broken, but the other was on display in the imperial gardens of Rome and had a length of a half an orguia (i.e. around one metre) (*Description of Greece* VIII:46,5). Mayor (2011) posed that these tusks were actually fossil tusks of elephants (or other Proboscidea animals) found in Pleistocene exposures in Greece where Proboscidea remains are common (cf. Doukas & Athanassiou 2003).



The most elaborate version of the story of the Calydonian boar stems from Ovid, one of the most popular poets of early Roman Imperial times. His work *Metamorphoses* is a collection of numerous myths in poetic form, of which Book VIII (verses 260-444) tells the tale of the Calydonian boar. Ovid placed the beginning of the final confrontation in a mire setting:

*“There was a hollow little valley, in which streams of rainwater discharged themselves. The deep hollow is held by wagging willows, smooth grasses, marsh rushes, willow shrubs, and small reeds underneath tall reed stalks. From here the roused boar rushed violently into the midst of its enemies, like lightning ejaculated from the clouds.*

*The woods were forced-down to the ground, and the forest uttered cracking sounds while being shoved away.” (“concava vallis erat, quo se demittere rivi adsuerant pluvialis aquae; tenet ima lacunae lenta salix ulvaeque leves iuncique palustres viminaeque et longa parvae sub harundine cannae: hinc aper excitus medius violentus in hostes fertur, ut excussis elisi nubibus ignes. sternitur incursu nemus, et propulsa fragorem silva dat”). (‘Metamorphoses’ VIII:334-341).*

Although it almost appears to be an eye-witness account, it is by no means clear what kind of vegetation Ovid described (see Glare 2016). “Salix” and “vimen” both denote willow, where the latter means intertwined brushwood-like shrubs rather than trees (“vimen” also means “wickerwork”, for which frequently willow branches were used). “Ulva” is a collective word denoting various wetland grass-, sedge- and rushlike plants in general, “iuncus” designates rushes or similar plants, “(h)arundo” generally means tall reeds, and “canna” denotes small reeds. Thus, to put it simple, it was a setting with some willow trees and shrubs, and many different kinds of green shoots. The small valley mire was at least fed by streams discharging rainwater: whether these were envisaged by Ovid to be continuously active or only during severe rain is unknown. Ovid was a poet, and his intention was to provide a pleasant-sounding poem with words that fitted well in the metre of his work, and botanical or ecological accuracy – as far as such concepts were at all known in Roman science - was not relevant. However, he may have modelled his poem on own observations or on tales from others who had seen mires. It is remarkable that Ovid described a marsh rather idyllically, whereas in general in the ancient Roman culture a large aversion existed against mires and peatlands (De Klerk & Joosten 2019). Possibly Ovid merely tried to contrast a friendly peaceful landscape with the violent destruction of the monstrous boar. However, also at other places in his works he seemingly provided a less negative view on wetlands than other Roman authors did. The reasons for this are unknown, and can be only a matter of speculation.

I am grateful to Immanuel Musäus for his help with the translation.

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